

MOLLY PEACOCK

Lunch with Rishma, 2009

We ate salads, of course. What else would a stylish beauty like Rishma Dunlop have ordered for lunch? On a quiet weekday in early spring, 2009, we finally sat down face to face for the very first time, about a year after the remarkable anthology of poems about motherhood she edited, *White Ink*, was published. Lake Ontario glittered its steely blue, but we were cozy inside Il Fornello on Queens Quay in Toronto. Rishma had the lake view. I had a view of Rishma: sophisticated, deliberate, her sweep of rich, long hair carefully in place, her clothes soft yet precise. All of those adjectives also described her poetry, which I had read and admired. It, too, is rich, sophisticated, deliberate, soft yet precise.

The practice of poetry is lonely. Oh yes, there are myriad social events for poets, and both of us had attended more than our share, but quiet intimacy between two sensibilities there seems little time for. We had an instant rapport, punctuating this leisurely couple of hours with amazement that it had taken us this long to find them. After all, we had circled around each other for years. We discussed our desires to write and also to edit, and the difficulties of poets editing poets. Suddenly the editor isn't a poet at all, but another writer's career steppingstone. *White Ink* (in which I was included) required Rishma's strong but delicate editorial labor to secure the permissions for a powerful array of Canadian and American verse.

How lucky we were to have stolen the time. It turned out to be a golden afternoon we shared—our only one. We gossiped. It was unabashed, unfiltered, and delicious. We were delighted to share similar opinions and career questions. Poor so-and-so, we lamented, brilliant but ignored. Then, outraged, and whispering, *How did so-and-so get such-and-such an award, position, coup?* There really was no need for sotto voce; Il Fornello, midweek on that chilly afternoon, was nearly empty.

We talked about the necessity for time to write, and how difficult securing that time was for her, then based both in British Columbia and Toronto. We talked about her children—Rishma felt a genuine delight at the support of her children for her writing life.

So it turned out by the end of those salads and the bringing of the pots of tea that our lunch together had a topic: Ambition. A nearly forbidden word for two women poets to utter. No wonder we had spent a couple of hours lowering our voices. We had conspired together: like two well-dressed spies from poetryland, sharing veneers of confidence and tentative hearts, seeking, from very different cultural points of view but very similar inner desires, to shape the ineffable in language that seemed to well up in us quite independently of the larger testosteroned world.

We had made one of those literary bonds that wasn't to grow very much, it turned out, but which remained solid, and faceted by this occasion. Later, Rishma invited me to York University to speak to her students. There must have been sixty of them chatting and lounging about on metal chairs. Suddenly she brought them all to attention with her quiet authority. Thinking of her now reminds me that the word "author" resides in "authority," and that is what I remember of Rishma Dunlop personally and always feel as I encounter her poetry. A resolute authority. Assured, yet tapped into an inner emotional palette of all the colors of her feelings, well chosen and complete.

But back to the almost ineffable: Rishma smelled great on those occasions. Was it her luxuriant shampoo? Or the accumulated scent on a scarf? She was a poet who knew how to drape a metaphor across a line.